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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000144

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [MARR](#) [FJ](#)
SUBJECT: NO BEND (YET) IN FIJI'S BAINIMARAMA

REF: A. WELLINGTON 114

[B](#). SUVA 121

[C](#). SUVA 85

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

[1](#). (C) A visit to Fiji by PNG Prime Minister Somare and Tonga PM Sevele to meet with interim PM Bainimarama late last week reportedly left Somare and Sevele still feeling uncomfortable about Fiji political developments. Bainimarama gave assurance that he intends elections in March 2009, but only on his terms. He rejected any political dialogue with other players like deposed PM Qarase. A meeting of EU envoys with Bainimarama last week also gained no concessions. Various sources indicate deep-seated unhappiness remains high, especially in the ethnic-Fijian community, and could be volatile; but Bainimarama appears confident he can weather any storm. End summary.

PNG, Tonga PMs visit Bainimarama, no break-through

[2](#). (U) PNG PM Somare and Tonga PM Sevele flew into Nadi on April 10 to meet with interim PM Bainimarama behind closed doors. The interim government was tight-lipped publicly about outcomes, if any. PM Sevele told the media that Bainimarama reaffirmed elections in Fiji will, indeed, take place in March 2009. Sevele acknowledged there have been "some delays" in achieving deadlines, but Bainimarama gave assurance that the interim government (IG) is "working toward the commitments they have made." Sevele told the media the meeting's secrecy was to foster frank discussion. He emphasized it is important that Fiji move ahead, not only for Fiji but for the Pacific as a whole.

[3](#). (C) A source who was in the meeting tells us the motivation for the PMs' visit was the region's continuing concern about developments in Fiji, as accented at the recent PIF ministerial in Auckland (Ref A). Sevele and Somare hoped discussion at their level directly with Bainimarama might spur action. The discussion was friendly, but also frank. Unfortunately, Bainimarama showed no real flexibility on key issues. When urged to engage in dialogue with deposed PM Qarase, as Sir Paul Reeves has proposed under Commonwealth auspices, Bainimarama was insistent that Qarase and his SDL Party "are history." Nothing would be gained. That dialogue will not happen. When asked if interim Foreign Minister Nailatikau might be Bainimarama's surrogate for a dialogue, the answer was a firm "no." On confusing IG pronouncements about how the People's Charter process fits into election

plans (Ref B), Bainimarama continued to maintain that he learned a lesson in 2000 when he gave back power before having transformed Fiji. This time, the Charter, which will resolve all Fiji's problems, must be in place before new elections. Asked about legalities for incorporating major changes into the Constitution, including possible new election rules, Bainimarama suggested that may be accomplished "by decree."

14. (C) Our source said Sevele and Somare entered the discussion hoping to influence Bainimarama into a degree of flexibility. Afterward, the two PMs remained ill at ease. Bainimarama did agree to meet again prior to the PIF Forum in Niue in August, and he did agree that the PIF minister-level working group on Fiji, set up in the Auckland meeting, will be allowed to visit if it wishes. In the meantime, Somare offered additional PNG assistance to the election-preparation process, if the IG asks.

EU envoys talk with Bainimarama; nothing new

15. (C) Brussels asked the EU, UK, and French reps in Suva to seek a meeting with Bainimarama, given a year has passed since Cotonou Agreement discussions of Fiji, and proposed elections are less than a year away. The meeting took place April 9. We hear from participants that the EU intent was to lay out clearly, yet again, the EU expectations as spelled out last April in Brussels. That took place. Bainimarama, for his part, stuck to the same script we heard during PDAS Davies' visit in February (Ref C). We are told the EU side sensed Bainimarama "just doesn't seem to understand" that the EU cannot compromise on basic principles. The EU must consider precedents for other problem countries. We hear a

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high-level visit from Brussels may take place in May to accent yet again EU concerns.

The mood in Fiji

16. (C) Various sources suggest that unhappiness within the ethnic-Fijian community against the coup and Bainimarama's IG remains high. On the economic side, no doubt an ever-larger portion of the public is suffering from the post-coup recession, coupled with the dramatic increase in global basic commodity prices. Still, Bainimarama reportedly told Somare and Sevele that most people, including ethnic-Fijians, support the IG and the People's Charter. Rumors continue to circulate of a possible counter-coup, without any visible manifestation. A good source tells us that LtCol. Tevita Mara, Commander of the 3rd Infantry Regiment, was sufficiently concerned about the Fiji security situation that he canceled plans to travel to Port Moresby with two of his sisters in early April to join celebrations for PM Somare's 40 years in politics.

Comment

17. (C) Bainimarama appears confident he can weather all storms. His continuing firmness in the conversations with the PMs and the EU, his reported unwillingness to consider a Reeves political dialogue, and his mention of the possibility that changes to elections rules, in effect constitutional amendments, can be accomplished by decree are all troubling.

Toss in the continuous rumblings beneath the surface, including by very high chiefs, and the mixture could be volatile; but that kindling has been stacked, seemingly awaiting a match, pretty continuously for the past sixteen months with no overt threat to the IG actually revealing itself to date.

DINGER